THE

MANUFACTURE OF IRON

IN BUFFALO.

A PAPER READ BY INVITATION BEFORE

THE BUFFALO HISTORICAL SOCIETY,

JANUARY 25, 1864.

BY JOHN WILKESON, ESQ.

BUFFALO:
PRINTING HOUSE OF WHEELER, MATTHEWS & WARREN
1864.

THE

MANUFACTURE OF IRON

IN BUFFALO.

Doctor Ure, of England, in speaking of Iron, beautifully says, "Every person knows the manifold uses of this truly precious metal. It is capable of being cast in molds of any form; of being drawn out in wires of any desired strength or fineness; of being extended into plates or sheets; of being bent in every direction; of being sharpened, hardened, and softened at pleasure."

Iron accommodates itself to all our wants, our desires, and even our caprices. It is equally serviceable to the Arts, the Sciences, to Agriculture, and War. The same ore furnishes the sword, the ploughshare, the scythe, the pruning-hook, the needle, the graver, the spring of a watch or of a carriage, the chisel, the chain, the anchor, the compass, the cannon, and the bomb. It is a medicine of much virtue, and the only metal friendly to the human frame.

Previous to the year 1826, the manufacture of iron in this city was confined to the ordinary blacksmithing work required by the community. In that year Edward Root erected the first foundry for making plough-irons and other small castings. Mr. Isaac W. Skinner soon after built another for making ploughs and other castings. Messrs. Gibson, Johnson & Ehle built at Black Rock, in 1826, a foundry and machine shop, which in those days was considered a large establishment, in which some large steam engines were constructed. In 1828, Messrs. Beals, Mayhew & Co., erected in this city at the corner of Ohio and Indiana streets, a foundry and machine shop, in which they built the first steam engines made here. Mr. John Hibbard was their Superintendent; he is still a resident here.

From time to time other foundries and machine-building shops, for casting stoves and making steam and other machinery, have been added to the number of such establishments, and now we have some twenty in all, doing in the aggregate a great business and giving support directly and indirectly to several thousands of people. For more than twenty years our founders and machinists have been able to construct engines of any size required for our lake navigation. In 1838, Mr. Justin built a forge at Black Rock Dam. In 1850, Mr. Charles Delany built the "Niagara Forge," for the fabrication of heavy masses of wrought iron. This establishment has been very successful. Another forge is now in the course of construction, and it doubtless will lead to the building of others.

We now come to the more important branches of the iron manufacture. The first rolling mill erected here was that known as the "Buffalo Iron and Nail Works," built in 1846 by Corns & Co., an association of operatives from Pittsburgh. This establishment has been enlarged and improved by Messrs. Pratt & Co., into whose hands it has passed, and is now doing an extensive businesss, making iron and nails of the best quality. During the winter of 1859–60, our citizens became very much interested on the subject of the promotion and the extension of manufactures. The depressed condition of our lake commerce and our navigation interests for some years, had convinced all that our city could never maintain its standing with other cities in the basin of the lakes, and hope for a continued increase of population, without providing some certain means of employment

counter one of the most striking problems of the age. Europe has already exhausted its capacity for the production of Iron, but its future needs have as yet hardly begun to be demonstrated. It follows, therefore, that the United States is destined from its inexhaustible iron resources to become the source of supply of the world. This fact, once established, will confer upon us an importance and an influence among the nations which can hardly be appreciated—certainly not overrated. Our enormous debt incurred in waging war to save the life of the nation whose existence was threatened by the atrocious traitors of the South, will impose upon us for many years the necessity of collecting heavy revenues on imports, which will have all the beneficial effects upon home industry of a protective tariff without its instability. Thus, out of this great mountain of evil, we will have this little grain of good. Our iron manufacturers will be protected from ruinous foreign competition, which under the ad valorem system imposed the least duty when prices were the lowest abroad, often having the almost instantaneous effect of closing our works (saving those making iron for the least cost,) and putting a stop to all new enterprises.

The production of pig, or crude iron, in the United States for the year past, is estimated to have been 1,000,000 tons. In 1840 the amount made was, in round numbers, 286,000 tons.—This shows an increase in twenty-four years of about 250 per cent. During all that period of time there has been a still greater ratio of increase in our importations of iron, our productions not keeping pace with the demand. Our population has increased from seventeen millions in 1840, to thirty-one millions in 1860—less than 100 per cent. This shows that the increased demand for iron, the great lever of material improvement, outstrips the increase of our population. Thus it would seem that there is little likelihood, for a long time to come, of any overproduction of iron in our country. That sheerest of humbugs, Free Trade, when adopted by nations whose legitimate manufactures are not firmly fixed, dies under our load of debt, and with it Slavery and the bullion theory are shuffled aside.

With stable and sufficient duties, our iron masters can go on securely and extend their operations, and when they succeed in supplying the home demand, they will have become so firmly established that they can enter into competition for foreign markets with every assurance of success.